Focus Group Meeting
High Speed Rail Feasibility and Planning Study
Nashua, New Hampshire

May 16, 2002

A focus group meeting for the Boston to Montreal High Speed Rail (HSR) feasibility and planning study was held on May 16, 2002 at the offices of the Nashua Regional Planning Commission (Nashua RPC) in Nashua, New Hampshire. Susan Smichenko of Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc. (FHI), public outreach consultants for the study, facilitated the meeting with assistance from Sylvie Zajac of FHI. Kit Morgan, Administrator of the Bureau of Rail and Transit for the New Hampshire Department of Transportation, and Donna Hill, Senior Planning Coordinator, Multimodal Transportation for the Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation and Construction (EOTC), were at the meeting representing the Steering Committee for the study.

Ms. Smichenko opened the meeting by providing a brief overview of the purpose of the meeting which was to solicit pubic feedback on the study from specific individuals with interests related to recreation and tourism, transportation, and economic development. Kit Morgan then provided an overview of the study and described the study's partnership between Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont as well as their coordination with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

Introductions of the participants were made including: Nancy Girard of the Conservation Law Foundation, Andrew Singelakis of the Nashua RPC, Beverly Woods of the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments, Anna Barry of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), Roger Hawk - Director of Community Development in Concord, Donald Leblanc – Public Affairs Director of the Quebec Delegation, Bill Kuttner representing the Shirley-Eustis House in Boston, and Lily Harnois of the New Hampshire Division of Travel and Tourism Development.

QUESTIONS/CONCERNS

The first part of the meeting focused on questions and concerns regarding the study from the participants. Questions and associated comments included the following:

- Referring to a New England Region 2000 Population Density map showing much of the corridor (brought to the meeting by Bill Kuttner), one participant noted the lack of information for Canada. Although this map was not prepared for the study, the issue of understanding the demographics of Montreal was noted.
- A question was raised how the study plans to measure demands for alternative transportation. A brief description of the surveys to determine ridership projections was provided to help the participant understand the process and how mode choice is incorporated into the model.
- Will freight service be included in the study? Kit Morgan indicated that, during Phase I, freight impacts are not being studied. A group participant volunteered

that Amtrak has limited legal rights to operate on freight lines, and that freight companies don't always welcome passenger service on their tracks.

- Would freight service be interested in the new track between Concord and White River Junction? One participant indicated his thoughts that this new track would be attractive to the freight companies. Another disagreed.
- What is the capacity of the track? Kit Morgan explained the Train Performance Calculator that is being used in the study to determine capacity and travel times.
- The question was asked whether or not the study was providing a full picture of both the positive and negative issues regarding a HSR service in the corridor and how this corridor compares nationwide to other corridors for funding purposes. One participant felt that it was very important for the public to understand the likelihood whether or not a HSR service in this corridor could ever happen, and consider the funding for future study phases accordingly. Others in the group offered that this type of planning study is important for transportation in the region regardless of its prioritization by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). Donna Hill of the EOTC indicated that these are issues which are being addressed by Parsons Brinkerhoff Quade & Douglas (PB), the lead consultant on the study.
- Do Boston and Montreal have a reason to be linked? One participant noted the opportunities presented by a HSR service are similar for Boston and Montreal since they both have similar populations with a strong emphasis on high tech industries and higher education.

A number of comments regarding the implementation of a HSR service were noted by the participants including:

- In order for a HSR service to be successful, it must be able to compete with the automobile. Air travel is not the issue.
- It is important for the region to have a regional approach to trade which includes a long-term view. One participant noted that as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), trade has shifted in Canada from east/west to north/south and that there have been recent increases in regional agreements between the New England states and Canada. He also indicated that the current situation presents a good opportunity for additional transportation connections, but acknowledged that, while they are supportive of future links, Quebec is not ready to commit capital to a future project.
- Tourism in the region was discussed at length. The general consensus among the majority of the group was that a HSR service in this corridor could provide a much needed connection for international tourists traveling from Logan Airport and Dorval Airport into New Hampshire and Vermont.
- It is important to leverage our political and economic connections by acting as a region. A HSR service in this corridor would encourage growth as a region. One participant noted that region building is a distant goal and questioned whether that should be a consideration in the study.
- A regional vision which includes all modes of transportation and connections between those modes is needed to take focus away from highway projects.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

Potential impacts of a future service were discussed. It was noted that a HSR service could result in induced travel. Also, people might be willing to travel further from their jobs which might result in dispersed patterns of density. Another member of the group noted that with rail, impacts are concentrated around designated station areas which could be regarded as smart growth rather than sprawl, however this was countered with another's point-of-view that smart growth cannot be guaranteed.

In general, the group agreed that a thorough analysis of the corridor in terms of impacts on land use would need to be completed for a future HSR service including potential benefits and/or impacts to land owners along the corridor, future housing potential in locations which may experience significant economic growth, and impact on infrastructure in affected communities. It was suggested that communities should be included in the study process.

Environmental impacts discussed included the significant benefit to air quality with the reduction in vehicles on the roads. A participant noted that the environmental impacts for rail are significantly less than those impacts associated with adding lanes to highways. Also mentioned was the fact that all grade crossings would need to be eliminated.

Kit Morgan mentioned the fact that a portion of the corridor in New Hampshire has been deemed eligible for the National Register indicating its significance as a historic district. Therefore, any revisions would require that the property be evaluated and the impacts compensated for or mitigated. He also mentioned that 59 miles of the corridor are currently being used for active recreational use, which would be impacted by the construction of a rail line.

OVERALL TRANSPORTATION PICTURE

The group was asked their perspective on how a high speed rail would fit into the overall transportation picture for the region. A participant noted that transit use has increased recently in Nashua, and a HSR service could provide an opportunity to link transportation systems. The Route 93 widening project between Manchester and Concord was discussed, in terms of how a HSR service could affect that project.

It was noted by one participant that a HSR service could infringe on the MBTA's existing capacity.

FUNDING

Participants were asked how they viewed a HSR service in terms of a priority for transportation funding. The group agreed that rail should be considered in planning efforts when investigating all transportation options for a region along with bicycles, pedestrians, and vehicle travel.

The group generally agreed that the gas tax should be used for rail, and that a level playing field between the alternative modes of transportation is needed. A participant noted that New Hampshire requires that the gas tax be used for roadway projects only. Diversified funding for all transportation modes is not happening in the region.

VISION OF A HSR SERVICE

The group was asked to describe how they envision a HSR service. The ideal components identified included:

- On-board storage for bikes, snowboards, and skis and other recreational equipment
- Competitive with the automobile – speed is very important
- Adequate number of stops
- Sufficient service (number of trains per day)
- Need to blend express and local service options
- Intermodal connections at HSR stations

CONCLUSION

Participants were thanked for their input and the meeting was closed by Ms. Smichenko with the invitation to attend the public meetings held in August or September for the presentation of the study's findings. The group was asked to keep informed on the study and provide feedback to the team via the study's website, www.bostonmontrealhsr.org.

After the meeting, Donald Leblanc provided some technical information for the study consultants including: "Comparative Elements between Montreal and Boston," the Scope of Work for the Northeast Freight Service and Investment Study funded by the Northeast Association of State Transportation Officials (NASTO), and a publication entitled "Greater Montreal Area Performance Indicators 2001" published by TechnoVision Montreal.

Bill Kuttner provided all attendees with a brochure detailing the self-guided walking tour for the Historic South Bay featuring the Shirley-Eustis House.